

RSE Workshop: Looking beyond growth: exploring the transformative potential of alternative economic development approaches

Glasgow, 6 February 2024

This briefing summarises the workshop held in Glasgow on February 6, 2024 to explore how 'alternative' economic development approaches are being put into practice. Other workshops have been held in Birmingham, Sheffield and Cardiff.

Our aim from these workshops is twofold:

- Develop a policy-research learning network on alternative approaches (online and through further events).
- Prepare for a larger research funding bid that would enable a more detailed exploration of the alternative approaches and how they are being put into practice.

The research team – which includes academics at Birmingham, Glasgow, Sheffield Hallam, Manchester, Newcastle and Cardiff universities – has been working together since 2019. We have developed an initial paper (<https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231187884>) that contrasted five prominent alternative approaches: **Wellbeing Economy (WE)**; **Doughnut Economics (DE)**; **Community Wealth Building (CWB)**; **Foundational Economy (FE)**; and **Inclusive Growth (IG)**. The workshops in this series enable us to build on this initial work by incorporating practitioner experiences.

The workshop in Glasgow was attended by 20 representatives from the public, higher education and third sectors. The discussion was organised around the following objectives:

- Examine how alternative approaches are being understood, adopted and implemented in different cities.
- Explore the factors that enable or constrain the operationalisation of alternative approaches.
- Identify what success looks like and how this can be measured.

Key feedback is outlined on the page which follows (please note that the discussion points given below do not necessarily equate to or imply agreement across all attendees).

Objective 1 – Understanding, adopting and implementing alternative approaches

- That the economy needs to deliver more than growth is more widespread than ever (e.g. OECD etc).
- FE and CWB have had more traction, especially in Scotland and Wales. DE has not been deployed as a local/regional strategy in the same way.
- IG “swept everyone along” because it is difficult to disagree with its basic premise. It was present in some of the later City Deals. However, it has suffered from never having a clear definition.
- FE is also part of the GCR’s regional economic strategy. It is viewed more as a sector than an alternative economic approach.
- CWB has been attractive because of its emphasis on supporting growth within LA areas and also because it is capable of addressing key concerns around inequalities in income, wealth and health. It has also enabled discussion between economic development and procurement teams. North Ayrshire has become the posterchild for CWB even though policies in other areas are similar. All that said, there has been some criticism that CWB does not embed sustainability concerns in its model compared with DE which brings those concerns front and centre.
- The GALLANT project has a workstream on systems transformation which has used DE. This resulted in the Glasgow City Portrait.
- The National strategy for Economic Transformation is framed in terms of WE. The Scottish Government’s adoption of CWB and WE is challenging the way it works but there is less certainty as to whether it is driving policy and filtering through the whole of the SG.
- There is variability in the extent to which local authorities are realizing explicit commitments to CWB through policies and or practice - for some it guides mainstream economic strategies whereas for others it’s “lip service” or a “bit on the side”.
- Wellbeing and Sustainable Development Bill still under discussion via consultation to explore how this is taken forward.
- Inclusive economy as an “in between” stage between inclusive growth and wellbeing economy

Objective 2 - Exploring the factors that enable or constrain the operationalisation of alternative approaches

Organisations are signed up to the overall strategies and visions, but many are not yet clear how they can be put into practice.

Enablers

- Political buy-in is crucial for adoption - CWB has been adopted where leaders and cabinet embrace the idea.
- Scottish Government's embrace of CWB has been influenced by local practice.
- In some areas politicians are leading the adoption of approaches (e.g. North Ayrshire); in others it is policy officers. There can be tensions between the two groups.
- Colleagues involved in DE noted that some business groups have been "brilliant" in supporting the agenda and how DE can be used to redesign business models.
- Bigger organisations may have more flexibility.
- An emerging understanding that social circumstances impact the economy.

Constraints

- There is limited scope for debates to influence some stakeholders e.g. social enterprises due to a lack of resources and capacity consumed by dealing with pressing issues during a time of crisis.
- Organisational cultures can limit engagement with alternative approaches.
- There is an “implementation gap” between policy objectives relating to alternative approaches and what is happening on the ground. The ideal sequence of policy > strategy > action plan > action doesn’t always materialise due to the lack of resourcing.
- It was noted that there can be tensions in the same organisation.
- Ultimately, “no one is willing to change the growth narrative. We talk about how we grow, not whether we should grow”.
- Divisive constitutional politics in Scotland has “over-ridden the ability to create consensus – there’s no space to get everyone around the table.
- Successful implementation requires people in powerful roles to commit to change.
- Implementation constrained by capacity, complexity and the reality that there are no additional resources for these agendas.
- Lack of autonomy to tread your own path.

Objective 3 - Identifying what success looks like and how this can be measured

- It is "unrealistic idealism" to think you will eradicate poverty and equality but you can make smaller practical changes that make a bit of a difference.
- 'Success' is "a better position than where we started".
- Fewer people living in relative or absolute poverty.
- There tends to be too much emphasis on 'outcomes' as opposed to 'outputs'.
- There needs to be emphasis on "action" - not just discussion.
- There is value in 'process evaluation' as well as 'summative evaluation' - so as to be able to learn 'what works' and adapt as projects/interventions progress.
- Alternative approaches can be hard to measure. There is a challenge in narrowing down a large number of metrics that can be used.
- Identifying attribution is difficult but that is sometimes used as an excuse.
- Lack of attention is paid to “what would have happened if we had done nothing” (i.e. counterfactual tends to be ignored).
- Drilling down to the LA level can be difficult where confidence intervals in data can be huge.
- Problems of small sample size at local level and a lack of trends data are key issues.
- Need to be able to pivot between concepts, but ultimately there are a set of indicators that people are working to.
- Need to have more focus on measuring 'practical actions'.
- A 'basket of indicators' is appropriate – especially because 'alternative approaches' require more indicators.
- There is an interest in 'cornerstone indicators' (which capture several indicators in one).